

Wavell and the Arab Rifles

by Judy Aldrick

The Kenyan port of Mombasa has long attracted eccentric and colourful characters — none more so, perhaps, than the soldier and war hero, explorer and swashbuckling adventurer, Major Arthur John Byng Wavell, who was born in 1882 and who died tragically at Mwele in the Shimba Hills in 1916, aged just 34.

His name is commemorated by an austere granite obelisk in the small, shaded public garden below the walls of Fort Jesus, alongside the fort's main entrance. Today, the Wavell Memorial, surrounded by its stone benches and cannons, provides a rather novel setting for an Arab coffee merchant who sells tiny cups of strong black coffee to passers-by. A few curious travellers do actually mount the steps to read the inscription on the base of the obelisk. But how many really know the story of Major Wavell and the Arab Rifles, to whom this impressive monument is dedicated?

Arthur Wavell, cousin of Lord Wavell, Field-Marshal and Viceroy of India, was educated at Winchester and Sandhurst, in England. In 1900 he obtained his commission as a Second Lieutenant in the Welsh Regiment, and went on to fight in the Boer War in South Africa between 1900 and 1902. From 1904 he worked for military intelligence on South Africa's Boundaries' Commission, compiling reports on the Bechuanaland Protectorate, Swaziland, Tonga and North Zululand. But then, in 1906, he resigned from the army and came to live in Mombasa, where he worked for Smith Mackenzie as one of the managers of its sisal estate at Nyali.

A talented linguist, Wavell quickly learned Arabic

and Swahili while in Mombasa, and became fascinated by Arab manners and customs. However, it was the allure of the forbidden and unknown — and the idea of daring and dangerous journeys, especially — that most appealed to him; so much so that he even harboured ambitions of making a name for himself as an explorer in Arabia.

Following in the footsteps of the legendary explorer and Arabist Richard Burton, he succeeded in 1908 in making the pilgrimage to Medina and Mecca, where he passed himself off as an Arab from Zanzibar. He travelled in the company of two friends: Masaudi, a Swahili from Mombasa, and Abdul Wahid, a very westernised Persian. On several occasions, when he escaped detection only narrowly, he was saved by the support of his companions, and by his own quick wit and inventiveness.

Had his disguise been discovered, he risked almost certain death, as in those days no Christian was allowed to set foot in the holy Muslim cities.

Emboldened by the success of his first journey, he decided to follow this up with a visit in 1910 to the holy city of Sanaa in the Yemen, an ancient city that few Europeans had then set eyes on. From there, he hoped to bring back a wealth of new information for the Royal Geographical Society, and to this end, he took with him a chronometer, a barometer and a thermometer, as well as a

camera and various other items of scientific equipment.

On arrival at the Yemeni port of Hodeidah, however, his luggage was confiscated, and he was refused permission to travel on to Sanaa. This was bad luck, for his arrival had just happened to coincide



*Damascus, 1908: Arthur Wavell as he appeared, aged 28, and in Arab dress, in the frontispiece of his book *A Modern Pilgrim in Mecca*, published in 1912.*

with an outburst of renewed fighting in the area. Doggedly refusing to accept 'no' as an answer, and determined to reach Sanaa by whatever means, Wavell resorted to subterfuge. He pretended to be sick, and then, disguising himself as a merchant, slipped out of the city along with his servant Ahmad.

The authorities, though, soon caught up with him in Sanaa, and — suspecting him to be a spy — placed him under close police supervision. During his stay in Sanaa, the city was besieged by rebels, and conditions there were far from comfortable. Wavell tried to escape, but within a kilometre of Sanaa he was recaptured by the Turks, who were then the ruling power in Yemen.

He was beaten, and paraded in handcuffs through the streets of the city for eight hours, before being taken in custody back to Hodeidah and handed over to the British Consul for immediate repatriation. Wavell at once tried to claim compensation for the loss of his baggage and for repeated mistreatment at the hands of the Turkish authorities. But although several heated articles appeared in *The Times*, and numerous letters passed back and forth between the British Foreign Office and 'The Sublime Porte' — as the capital city of the Ottoman Empire, Constantinople, was then known — nothing ever came of the matter.

Back in Mombasa he wrote down the story of his adventures in a very entertaining book entitled *A Modern Pilgrim in Mecca*, which was published in 1912.

According to the entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, written by his friend and contemporary Leonard Darwin, son of the acclaimed naturalist Charles Darwin:

Neither of Wavell's Arabian adventures did much to increase science. Both were undertaken merely as preliminaries to serious exploration. Unfortunately a subsequent plan of his to penetrate Arabia ... came to

nothing: and he had no further opportunity to show that he was equipped with the diligent curiosity and acquired competence of a scientific explorer, as well as the ambition, address and daring of an adventurer. In any case he had the gift of narrating adventures vividly and with humour.

In 1913, Wavell was gazetted a Lieutenant in the Special Reserve of Officers of the Welsh Regiment. His finest hour came with the outbreak of World War One, when entirely of his own initiative he organised a fighting force, comprised largely of water-carriers from Mombasa's Old Town, which he then incorporated into His Majesty's Forces as 'The Arab Rifles'. Kenneth Hunter Rodwell, who had also been working on the sisal estate at Nyali, was his second-in-command.

In August 1914, when the German General, Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, and five-hundred *askaris* with six machine guns marched up the Coast Road towards Mombasa, volunteer units rushed southward to stop them. Wavell's Arabs were first on the scene.

One eye-witness account of what happened next leaves us in no doubt that Mombasa was saved by the prompt action of Wavell and T Ainsworth Dickson, who was then administrative officer of Vanga District. For, as K H Rodwell later disclosed in an interview ~~conducted by his son Edward, of Coast~~ *Gauserie fame: (no relative!)*.

We were first attacked at Vanga on August 16. Ainsworth Dickson and I fired the first shots on the evening of that day. Arthur Wavell with the rest of the Arab contingent made a forced march to our relief and we attacked the German *boma* on the border a few days later in the early morning. Since [our] rifles and ammunition dated from about 1870 and the bayonets were tied on with string it was fortunate for all of us that the bluff succeeded.

EDWARD RODWELL



JUDY ALDRICK



Karama (at far left), photographed in 1975, was at Wavell's side at Majorini in 1914, when the Major was wounded by the Germans in a border skirmish. Left: Wavell's gravestone near Mkongani, on the lower south-western slopes of the Shimba Hills, marks the spot where the Major fell.

Wavell's brave force of water-carriers, armed with their antiquated rifles, had — by halting the German advance — been instrumental in providing a breathing space for the British authorities in Mombasa, who had clearly been caught completely unprepared.

Wavell was wounded at Majorini in another border skirmish with the German forces on September 25 1914. But he was soon fit enough to fight again. He was promoted to the rank of Major on December 17 1915, but was killed less than a month later, when he and a contingent of his Arab Rifles were caught in an ambush at the watering hole at Mkongani on January 9 1916.

There was a garrisoned look-out post close by on Mwele Hill in the Shimba Hills, and Wavell was probably on his way to or from this post when he was surprised by the Germans. Sadly, the incident receives barely a mention in history books dealing with World War One, so it is not very clear exactly what happened. But this area was known to be especially vulnerable to attack, as both sides set about guarding their railways, which as their main supply routes were of course of prime strategic importance.

Arthur Wavell received the posthumous award of a Military Cross. Ali bin Salim, who was then the Mudir at Gazi, went personally to collect and bury his body, so great was the outpouring of grief at his death. Thirty other men of the Arab Rifles also lost their lives on that fateful day, but after Wavell's death the unit fell apart as a military force.

A grave inscribed with the names of non-commissioned officers and of the brave men of the Arab Rifles can still be seen today, by the roadside at Mkongani. A little way off the road, up a slope in what is now a citrus orchard, there is another grave stone marking the exact spot where Wavell fell, shot in the legs and chest, and where a colleague

of his, a Lieutenant Mackintosh, was also killed.

The special Memorial to Wavell and the Arab Rifles was put up outside Fort Jesus by the grateful citizens of Mombasa, and was unveiled in 1928 by the Duke and Duchess of Gloucester. ¹⁹²² Another war memorial, in honour of all those fought for the British in World War One, was also erected nearby, at Mwembe Tayari.

Arthur Wavell was by all accounts a well respected figure in Mombasa society. His bold exploits in Arabia and the Yemen had made him a byword among the Swahilis and the Arabs of the Old Town who so willingly banded together under his leadership.

His batman, Karama, whom Edward Rodwell met by chance many years afterwards, still proudly recalled being at the Major's side when he was wounded at Majorini, and remembered how he had helped to bandage Wavell's wounds. Karama vowed that he would never forget Wavell.

Wavell's friendly and open manner comes through in his writing. His kindness and compassion in rescuing a Mombasa boy called Kepi, who had been left stranded at Mecca following the death of his father, was typical of the man. On the down side, though, Wavell was also somewhat rash and quick-tempered. There were several occasions on his travels in Mecca when pistols were drawn,

and bloodshed only narrowly averted.

In many ways a typical product of his age, he was a keen hunter and sportsman and an early member of the Mombasa Club, where he was known for recounting his adventures before an invariably appreciative audience around the Men's Bar. Although it seems tragic that such an exceptionally talented man should die at the early age of 34, Wavell himself would no doubt approve of all the travellers and tourists who now come to enjoy the rest and shade provided by his Memorial and the tranquil garden in which it stands. ■



Imposing obelisk: the Wavell Memorial outside Fort Jesus in Mombasa, as it appears today.

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